

11/26/24: “Onions are excellent company” - Robert Farrar Capon

One of my favorite opening chapters in all of literature can be found in Father Robert Farrar Capon’s relentlessly charming and insightful book, *The Supper of the Lamb*, in which he (very seriously) instructs the reader to sit down and examine an onion for an hour. Father Capon was a talented cook and an Episcopal Priest and *The Supper of the Lamb* is a theological treatise on everything from prayer to poetry and puff pastry. He makes the case for “paying attention” and Christian/spiritual mindfulness using the instructions for preparing this meal as a guided tour for being deeply present in the sights, smells, and tastes of this holy moment.

These are faith reflections in 5 minutes or less, so we are about 55 minutes short of being able to walk through the onion practice...but I invite you to hear a few snippets to think about as you are preparing food this week for the feast that is Thanksgiving.

Admittedly, spending an hour in the society of an onion may be something that you have never done before. You feel perhaps, a certain resistance to the project. Please don’t. As I shall show later, a number of highly profitable members of our race have undertaken it before you. Onions are excellent company.

Notice that your onion has two ends: a lower now marked only by the blackish gray spot from which the root filaments descended into the earth; and an upper, which terminates in a withered peak of onion paper. Note what you have discovered: an onion is not a sphere in repose. It is a linear thing, a bloom of vectors thrusting upward from base to tip. Stand your onion, therefore, root end down upon your board and see it as the paradigm of life that it is - as one member of the vast living, gravity defying troop that, across the face of the earth, moves light and airward as long as the world lasts.

Capon invites us to consider the “elegant dryness” of the onion’s outer paper and the stark contrast of the “floodgates of being” that dwell within. He calls to attention the “noble reek” once the onion is cut and how effectively it is contained when an onion is whole. Still, the onion’s flavor, when released, brings incredible flavor to the world. “Reflect also how, without water, nothing can hold a soul...and God said, ‘Let the waters bring forth abundantly...’” As a part of the created good order of this world, the uniqueness and lessons found in an onion are of God’s present delight and immediate joy found in what you see around you, and in the thousand other wonders that you do not even suspect.

If your Thanksgiving plans are similar to ours, then you probably are not going to have the luxury of spending an hour with an onion this week. There may yet be moments for mindfulness as you are preparing a meal or snack or side dish. A holiday like Thanksgiving is the closest many of us come to having cooking be our vocation for a couple of days. If you aren’t a fan of cooking, this could add to the stress of the experience, maybe instead of the culinary toil, perhaps call your attention to the company that you share the meal with, the reason for your toil.

So as you are in the kitchen or gathering with others, take a moment to consider what lessons from the onion we might see in the wonders around us, be they the ingredients we are transforming into a dish, or the family and friends that we share the table with. And don't forget that YOU are one of those wonders of God's creative hand as well. Happy Thanksgiving!